

Which 'Rational Kernel'? Which 'Mystical Shell'? A Contribution to the Debate on the Connection between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*

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1 The Issue at Stake

The question about Hegel's legacy in the Marxian critique of political economy has been one of the most widely debated issues within the history of Marxist thought. In recent decades, a new strand of scholarly work has emerged which has radically challenged the 'received wisdom' about the 'Hegel–Marx connection'.¹ Usually grouped under the 'systematic dialectic' label, this novel assessment of the intellectual relationship between the two German thinkers has decisively broken with the orthodox views of Diamat as epitomised in Stalin² and official Soviet manuals, which in turn drew direct inspiration from the classical works of Engels,³ Plekhanov⁴ and Lenin.⁵ On the other hand, this new critique has also provided an alternative to the views associated with the so-called 'Western Marxist' tradition, whose interest in the recovery of the Hegelian lineage in Marx's thought fundamentally centred on reinstating the rôle of subjectivity against the crude objectivism and economism of Diamat.

This more recent strand of research has focused on the *methodological* relevance of Hegel's thought for the development of the Marxian critique of political economy. More specifically, whereas in earlier studies the emphasis was mainly on the relationship between Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the 'young Marx', this more recent literature has focused on the links between *Capital* and Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Although there are various particular controversies over the precise nature of this connection, most contributions agree that the structure of the argument in *Capital* is organised in a dialectical form which, at the very least, can be said to draw formal inspiration from the general form of movement of categories that Hegel deploys in his *Logic*. Thus Marx's

1 See, for instance, Murray 1988, Reuten and Williams 1989, Smith 1990, Moseley 1993b, Moseley and Campbell 1997, and Arthur 2002.

2 Stalin 1947 [1938].

3 Engels 1987a [1877], 1987b [1872–82] and 1991 [1886].

4 Plekhanov 1965 [1891], and 1976 [1895].

5 Lenin 1977 [1908], and 1976 [1895–1916].

presentation is seen as involving a (synthetic) movement from the more abstract or simple form-determinations of the subject-matter (namely, capital) to the increasingly more concrete or complex forms in which it moves and eventually manifests in 'empirical' reality, thereby culminating in the intellectual reproduction of capital as the unity of those many determinations. Inasmuch as the transition from one economic form to the next is seen as being driven by the development of the contradictions immanent in each of them, their relationship is generally deemed as internal and grounded in dialectical necessity, in contrast with the externality that inevitably results from the use of formal logic.

Now, beyond this general consensus within the 'systematic dialectic' literature, two broadly defined approaches can be identified.⁶ Firstly, there is the group of authors who examine the Hegel–Marx connection through the so-called 'homology-thesis'. Perhaps the most emblematic contribution from this perspective can be found in the work of Chris Arthur,⁷ who argues for the existence of a very close *'homology'* between the structure of Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*.⁸ According to this approach, a strict mapping of most categories of the *Science of Logic* onto the systematic presentation in *Capital* is possible (and actually illuminating), 'because capital is a very peculiar object, grounded in a process of real abstraction in exchange in much the same way as Hegel's dissolution and reconstruction of reality is predicated on the abstractive power of thought'.⁹

The second strand within the 'systematic dialectic' literature consists in a materialist reading of Hegel's work in general and the *Logic* in particular. Tony Smith's work is perhaps the most representative of this perspective.¹⁰ The essential point made by Smith is that Hegel's dialectical method *fully* coincides with Marx's, notwithstanding the latter's repeated remarks to the contrary throughout his lifetime. The *Logic* is thus read as a systematic-dialectical exposition of the fundamental ontological structures of real material being, that is, as a 'materialist ontology'.¹¹ The relevance of the *Logic* thus derives from providing the basic categories that are needed to capture the 'intelligibility' of the material world.¹²

In sum, whereas for Arthur's approach the content of the *Logic* is *purely and absolutely idealist*, according to Smith's interpretation it is *sheer materialism*.

6 See Riccardo Bellofiore in this volume, pp. 167–72.

7 Arthur 2002.

8 Arthur 2002, p. 7.

9 Arthur 2002, p. 8.

10 Smith 1990.

11 Smith 1990, p. 8.

12 Smith 1990, p. 5.

Whereas for Arthur's homology-thesis the *Logic* can shed light on capitalist social forms only, for Smith's Hegel-as-materialist reading its field of 'applicability' or relevance is broader and could in principle include non-capitalist social forms and natural forms as well. Finally, whereas according to Arthur the Marxian critique of political economy can benefit from the discovery of homologous logical forms implicit in the inner connection between the different form-determinations of capital, for Smith the question is rather that of becoming aware of the general ontological structures that organise the systematic ordering of economic categories.

Now, this debate about the significance of the *Logic* for the critique of political economy can be reframed in terms of Marx's well-known explicit statement about the relationship between his dialectical method and Hegel's: the key issue at stake seems to be the establishment of the precise nature of the rational kernel within the (allegedly) mystical shell.¹³ This chapter attempts to contribute to the debate by providing an alternative perspective on the connection between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital* to the two just sketched out above. Drawing on Juan Iñigo Carrera's work on the relationship between the dialectical method and the critique of political economy,¹⁴ we shall argue that the methodological and scientific significance of the *Logic* – the 'rational kernel' – does not come down to offering the purely logical form of capital's peculiar inverted ontology. Here we tend broadly to concur with Smith's critique of the homology-thesis. However, *contra* Smith, we shall also show that the content of the *Logic* cannot be simply taken over for a Marxian 'systematic dialectic'. As we shall see, the 'mystical shell' affects the very structure of Hegel's book.

2 Marxists on *Science of Logic's* Rational Kernel and Mystical Shell

In the founding works of Diamat, the *Logic* is usually taken as containing 'the fundamental laws of dialectics', which are then to be applied to more concrete objects such as history, capitalism, and so on. It is thus argued that Hegel would have discovered those laws but 'in his idealist fashion as mere laws of thought'.¹⁵ In so far as those texts do not offer any substantive critique of the specific content developed in the *Logic* (which in many cases they simply reproduce almost word by word), it must be assumed that for this reading the rational

13 Marx 1983a, p. 248, and Marx 1976c [1867], p. 103.

14 Iñigo Carrera 1992, 2007, 2013, and in this volume.

15 Engels 1987b [1872–82], p. 356.

kernel consists in the dialectical unfolding of the logical categories just as is presented by Hegel. For its part, the mystical shell is seen in Hegel's claim that the subject of those different logical forms is not the real human being 'reflecting' in his brain the structure and movement of matter or nature, but the 'Absolute Idea'. This position is nicely expressed by Lenin's famous aphorism: the question is how to 'read Hegel materialistically . . . that is to say . . . cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea, etc.'¹⁶ It would seem, then, that the matter comes down to the substitution of a materialist terminology for Hegel's idealist one, that is, replacing the term 'Idea' with the word 'matter'.

This orthodox interpretation has been challenged from two opposing perspectives. The first one submits that uncritically appropriating the systematic-dialectical method unfolded in the *Logic* necessarily involves accepting Hegel's absolute idealism. In this sense, there simply is no rational kernel to discover. At the other end, some authors argue that the *Logic* does not deal with any metaphysical super-subject, but only unfolds systematically all the necessary categories for making intelligible the more abstract ontological structures of the material world. As a consequence, this reading tends to conclude that there actually is no mystical shell. Hegel's *Logic* is therefore seen as all rational kernel from beginning to end.

Lucio Colletti's influential *Marxism and Hegel* is a good illustration of the first perspective.¹⁷ According to this author's provocative thesis, the main achievement of Hegel's *Logic* is to offer, for the first time in the history of philosophy, a solid exposition and justification of 'idealism in a logically coherent fashion'.¹⁸ And it does this precisely by resorting to the dialectical method. Colletti makes his case by critically examining the dialectic of the finite and the infinite that Hegel develops in the 'Logic of Being'. In this reading, the demonstration of the contradictory character of the finite contained in those pages constitutes a key moment in Hegel's speculative philosophy, since 'finitude is the most stubborn category of the understanding'.¹⁹ The reason for this speculative significance is that in the finite the understanding grasps 'the negation as *fixed in itself*, and it therefore stands in abrupt contrast to its affirmative',²⁰ that is, the infinite. In sticking to the fixity of finite being, that is, in denying the dissolution of the finite or the 'ceasing to be of the ceasing-to-be',²¹ the under-

16 Lenin 1976 [1895–1916], p. 104.

17 Colletti 1973 [1969].

18 Colletti 1973 [1969], p. 8.

19 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 129.

20 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 130.

21 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], pp. 130–1.

standing can only grasp it 'as irreconcilable with the infinite'²² and, hence, condemns the mediation between them to failure. On the contrary, with the awareness of the contradictory character of the finite and its resulting 'ontological instability', Hegel is able to reveal how the finite, through its own immanent dialectic, passes over into the infinite. In this way, he overcomes the radical opposition between them, a task which the understanding is unable to achieve. However, Colletti's argument goes on, Hegel can only succeed at this by condemning the finite to unreality or ideality. In other words, Hegel can provide a rationally coherent speculative mediation of the finite and the infinite by reducing the former to a vanishing moment of the latter's process, which alone possesses 'true' reality. On the other hand, Colletti points out that for Hegel only thought has universality and infinity. The dialectic of the finite is thus equated by Hegel to the 'annihilation of matter'. Thus Colletti concludes that this demonstration of the dialectical or self-contradictory character of finite being must of necessity entail absolute idealism, since the sensuous material world (the finite) is conceived as a mode of existence of thought (the infinite). The dialectical method, that is, the conception according to which 'everything finite is alterable and perishable' and 'being implicitly the other of itself, is driven beyond what it immediately is and overturns into its opposite',²³ is for Colletti inherently idealistic.²⁴

Now, if we examine more closely the dialectic of the finite in *Science of Logic*, it becomes clear that, *pace* Colletti, those pages do not develop a demonstration of the ideal character of the sensuous material world and therefore do not provide the key argument for the idealist nature of Hegel's system.²⁵ The only thing that Hegel is proving there is the fact that things are 'finite' means that they carry within themselves the necessity of their own negation. Consequently, they cannot be properly grasped if represented as self-subsistent entities or immediate (or unmediated) affirmations. Instead, things or objects need to be grasped as *self-moving*, that is, as *subjects* of their own qualitative transformation into another 'finite' form. An object thus realises its own qualitative determination by becoming another, that is, through *self-mediation*. This is, in our view, all that Hegel is trying to expound in those pages: real forms of 'being' affirm through self-negation. It is in that specific sense that according to him reality is the *movement of contradiction*. To put it differently, Hegel's point in those pages is just to say that the true infinite is nothing but the immanent *self-movement* of the finite, which it affirms through self-negation. Colletti's

22 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 130.

23 Hegel 1991 [1817], p. 130.

24 Colletti 1973 [1969], pp. 14–15.

25 See Houlgate 2005, p. 429.

reading of those texts, which conflates Hegel's *systematic exposition* and his indisputably idealist remarks in the *addendum*, leads him to throw the baby out with the bath-water.

Thus, Hegel's insight into the self-moving nature of real forms, which constitutes his great scientific discovery and thus the rational kernel to be found in the *Logic*, is not inherently tied to his absolute idealism. In fact, following Iñigo Carrera,²⁶ one could argue that the opposite is the case. In other words, it is the rejection of that Hegelian discovery that inevitably leads to an idealist representation of reality. In effect, when real forms are represented as devoid of any immanent necessity driving them to self-movement, forms of 'being' are reduced to lifeless abstractions which can only be put into *external* relation with each other by means of subjective reflection. An unbridgeable gap between knowledge and reality is bound to emerge. As a consequence, the relations between objects that are then established through the act of cognition (that is, the theoretical construct) must inevitably remain alien to the immanent nature of things themselves. In this way, although ideas are not believed to 'produce' reality by this train of thought, it follows that they do bestow movement upon real forms (thereby determining the nature of their mutual relations). Conversely, only when things are grasped as bearers of an intrinsic objective potentiality for self-movement does it make sense to raise the question of the ideal reproduction of the 'immanent life' of the subject-matter.

This last point can perhaps serve us to bring out more clearly the difference between Colletti's ultimately Kantian perspective and Marx's materialist-dialectical method. Colletti, in a truly Kantian fashion, saw more abstract determinations of objects as merely subjective ideas that help organise a given, immediately-perceived content, of which alone he is ready to predicate materiality and sensuousness.²⁷ By contrast, Marx considered the non-immediately perceptible, more abstract determinations of real forms as *objective*, even if cognised only by means of thought. On this particular point, Marx was fundamentally in agreement with Hegel although, as we shall see in the next section, he did consider that such rational insight was presented in the *Logic* within a mystical shell.

Let us now turn to the other position on the rational kernel and mystical shell in Hegel's *Logic*, which can be found in the aforementioned work of Tony Smith. According to the argument put forward in his book *The Logic of Marx's*

26 Iñigo Carrera 2013.

27 Strictly speaking, Colletti does recognise the objectivity of abstract forms, but only for capitalism, whose 'social ontology' gives rise to a suprasensible 'world of abstractions' (Colletti 1973 [1969], p. 227ff). Here he anticipates some of Arthur's ideas.

'*Capital*', Hegel's *Logic* deals with the fundamental categories of thought that are necessary to grasp the inner intelligibility of reality. In this treatment of logical categories, Smith argues, Hegel 'derive[s] three general types of categorial structures', one of 'simple unity', another of 'difference' and, finally, another of 'unity in difference'.²⁸ Moreover, in so far as those categorial structures are immanently and contradictorily connected, it is possible to 'construct a systematic theory of categories by employing the dialectical method'.²⁹

In this reading, the *Logic* turns out to be entirely 'compatible with Marx's materialist ontology',³⁰ so that there is no reason to reject it for its idealism. Moreover, the alleged ground of Hegel's idealism cannot even be found where Marx himself thought it could be located, that is, towards the end of the categorial construction, at the point where Hegel unfolds the transition to the realm of nature and of human spirit as the self-negating action of the Absolute Idea. According to Smith, in those passages Hegel 'is indulging in picture-thinking, in imaginative representations that on his own terms belong on a pre-philosophical level',³¹ a form of expression that he was compelled to resort to in order to make his philosophy appealing to a mainly Christian readership.

Now, if we set aside the thorny question of textual support for this reading, Smith's interpretation would indeed be plausible and, if correct, would certainly free Hegel's philosophy from charges of absolute idealism. However, this would not automatically turn Hegel into a materialist in Marx's specific sense. In order to prove this, a different kind of argument would be needed. Above all, proof should be provided that the structure of real material being actually coincides with the structure of pure thought-forms presented in the *Logic*. Smith's further claim that the categories presented in that work 'are initially won in confrontation with the empirically given'³² will not do either, since that is far from guaranteeing that the *systematic ordering* of those categories ideally reproduces the 'immanent life' of real material being. To put it differently, the question about the alleged materialist character of the *Logic* cannot be settled with evidence of Hegel's recognition of an objective reality existing outside thought. Instead, we think that the crux of the matter is whether the Hegelian systematic dialectic of logical forms correctly reproduces the more abstract determinations of material reality 'by means of thought'.

28 Smith 1990, pp. 5–6.

29 Smith 1990, pp. 6, 13.

30 Smith 1990, p. 36.

31 Smith 1990, p. 11.

32 Smith 1990, p. 4.

As we intend to show in the next section, Hegel's systematic development in the *Logic* is inherently flawed as an ideal reproduction of the inner connection between the more abstract forms of material reality. In a nutshell, we argue that in so far as his systematic dialectic begins with the simplest *thought-form* (that is, with a purely ideal or formal abstraction), his subsequent derivation of categories is bound to follow the immanent necessity of 'pure thought' as such, which, we shall further submit, does not express the inner movement of the simpler determinations of 'real material being'. In this sense, we do think that the peculiar form given by Hegel to his systematic dialectic is immanently bound to an idealist standpoint, although for very different reasons from those put forward by Colletti. This does not mean that there is nothing to recover from Hegel's immanent development of thought-forms. It only means that those rational elements need to be carefully discovered within a presentation which is, by virtue of its idealist nature, structured in such a form and ridden with categories that would have no place in a materialist systematic dialectic. Seen in this light, the main problem with Smith's perspective is not that his materialist reading of Hegel is not convincing. Rather, the key issue is that he takes over from Hegel a systematic dialectic which is quite simply flawed. As a consequence, alongside the 'rational kernel', he cannot but carry over the 'mystical shell'.

3 The Rational Kernel and Mystical Shell in Hegel's *Logic*

Abstraction versus Analysis

The starting point of the *Logic* is 'pure being' as thoroughly 'empty thinking'.³³ In other words, the book begins with being as a *thought-form* or the *thought of being*. The profound meaning and broader significance of this peculiar point of departure in Hegel's philosophy has been the subject of numerous controversies among commentators, particularly with regard to the connection between this category of thought and 'real being'. However, few scholars have actually taken Hegel to task for beginning his systematic dialectic with a thought-form. We shall consider below the implications that this point of departure has for the main theme of this chapter, namely, the rational kernel and mystical shell to be found in the *Logic*. For the moment, let us first critically examine the methodological procedure that is presupposed by Hegel's discovery of 'pure being' as the simplest category that sets into motion the subsequent dialectical unfolding of logical forms.

33 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 82.

Hegel's choice of categorial starting point and the procedure by which he arrives at it follows from his idea that true speculative philosophy must involve *presuppositionless thinking*.³⁴ The 'beginning', he states, 'must be an *absolute*, or what is synonymous here, an *abstract* beginning; and so it *may not presuppose anything*'.³⁵ 'Strictly speaking', he further argues in the *Encyclopaedia*, 'this requirement is fulfilled by the freedom that abstracts from everything, and grasps its pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking'.³⁶ More concretely, the procedure through which one can arrive at this pure abstraction consists in casting aside any thought that entails a certain complexity or concreteness, that is, any thought whose content presupposes the existence of any other thought. At this juncture, one could of course object that such an elementary abstraction would not have been reached on properly scientific grounds, that is, that it would be the result of a purely formal procedure that does not guarantee that we have actually reflected the immanent life of the subject-matter under consideration. In other words, this category would be a purely *formal abstraction* resulting from an act of subjective reflection that remains external to the object of cognition. Indeed, Hegel's retrospective discussion of the beginning of science in the section on the Absolute Idea speaks to this issue: the simplest category constituting the point of departure of his *Logic* is depicted as an 'abstract universal', which is said to be arrived at by *abstracting from* all determinacy.³⁷ In other words, pure being, as the category that sets into motion the (synthetic) movement of the *Logic*, is a category akin to those of the 'understanding' or 'representational thought', that is, one which only grasps objects one-sidedly in terms of their abstract self-identity.³⁸ In fact, as Carlson suggests, it could be said that it is actually the understanding that undertakes the act of abstraction and not speculative thought as such.³⁹ In this sense, Hegel saw the specificity of his 'absolute method' as essentially residing in the synthetic moment, that is, in the reconstitution of the unity of the different moments of the totality through a movement from its most abstract thought-form (pure Being) to its most concrete (the Absolute Idea).⁴⁰ Thus, he did not seem to recognise anything specifically speculative in the procedure through which the simplest category is arrived at, that is, in the reverse

34 Houlgate 2005, p. 29ff.

35 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 70.

36 Hegel 1991 [1817], p. 124.

37 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], pp. 69–72, 827–9.

38 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], pp. 795ff, 828.

39 Carlson 2007, pp. 27–8.

40 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], pp. 830–1, 838.

movement from the concrete to the abstract which the synthetic phase of systematic science presupposes.

Still, for Hegel such a discussion of the nature of the act of abstracting is immaterial at the initial stage of the investigation, since, strictly speaking, science proper has not actually begun. As he puts it some pages later in the *Logic*, '[w]hen being is taken in this simplicity and immediacy, the recollection that it is the result of complete abstraction . . . is left behind, outside the science'.⁴¹ As a contemporary Hegel scholar nicely puts it, in order to remain firmly on the path to a science without presuppositions, 'we must even abstract from and set aside – indeed deliberately forget – the very fact that pure being is the product of abstraction'.⁴² Indeed, *once the standpoint of 'absolute knowing' is adopted*, and therefore *thought* as such is taken to be the legitimate immediate object of the investigation, the scientifically poor nature of the procedure through which its simplest category has been grasped (that is, the relative poverty of formal abstraction) does not compromise the validity of the subsequent dialectical unfolding that 'pure Being' sets into motion. Thus, regardless of the procedure used, the essential point is that in this process the speculative thinker has never abandoned his/her 'object-realm', namely, pure thought. In this sense, as long as (some version of) the identity of thought and being reached in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is taken on board, Hegel's argument is perfectly coherent on this score, although, as we argue below, it is still inherently tied to his idealism.

However, matters are very different from a materialist standpoint. From this perspective, the method of formal abstraction as the prelude to synthetic development is rather problematic. In effect, when the immediate object of the act of cognition is not thought of as an existing form of 'material being', the formal abstraction resulting from arbitrarily casting aside all specific determinations inevitably takes us rather far from, and actually outside, the very 'object-realm' that we originally set about to cognise, namely, material reality. Following Marx's example in *The Poverty of Philosophy*,⁴³ if we abstract from the materials which make up a house, the result will be a purely ideal representation of a house with no materials, something which has no real referent, since there is no such thing in material reality. Hence, in abstracting from particular features of a concrete material object (a procedure that can be repeated as many times as the thinker wishes in order to find an ever simpler or more universal determination), we will no longer be dealing with really existing

41 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 99.

42 Houlgate 2005, p. 87; Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 99.

43 Marx 1976b [1847], p. 163.

objects but with purely ideal or mental abstractions, that is, with 'pure thoughts'. On this basis, the subsequent reconstitution of the unity of the object cannot but result in a purely ideal construct, which will remain external to the object of cognition that constituted the starting point, and which only by chance will reproduce in thought 'the immanent life of the subject matter'. It follows from this that for a materialist, the consequence of using the method of formal abstraction is, if he/she does not wish to become a Hegelian idealist, the relapse into Kantian dualism, where the theoretical construct, no matter how internally consistent or coherent, will inevitably be radically separated from the real object of cognition.

This is why we think that a materialist engagement with Hegel's *Logic* cannot avoid the critique of the initial formal abstraction that sets into motion the whole systematic development. This is precisely the cornerstone of Feuerbach's foundational critique of Hegel, as the following passage from *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* eloquently puts it. Hegelian philosophy, Feuerbach states:

presupposes nothing; this is nothing more than to say that it abstracts from all objects given immediately . . . In short, it abstracts from everything from which it is possible to abstract without stopping to think [*sic*], and makes this act of abstraction from all objectivity the beginning of itself.⁴⁴

A few years later, Marx would develop in *The Poverty of Philosophy* a critique of Hegel's idealist abstraction along clearly Feuerbachian lines.

Is it surprising that everything, in the final abstraction – for we have here an abstraction, and not an analysis – presents itself as a logical category? . . . If we abstract thus from every subject all the alleged accidents, animate or inanimate, men or things, we are right in saying that in the final abstraction, the only substance left is the logical category. Thus the metaphysicians who, in making these abstractions, think they are making analyses . . . are right in saying that things here below are embroideries of which the logical categories constitute the canvas.⁴⁵

The significance of the latter passage for the purpose of our argument is that it brings to light Marx's alternative to Hegel's procedure of formal abstraction, namely *analysis*. Unfortunately, despite the stark contrast between abstraction

44 Feuerbach 1986 [1843], p. 19.

45 Marx 1976b [1847], p. 163.

and analysis made in the text above, and the many occasions on which Marx highlights the important rôle of analysis as a necessary moment of his scientific method,⁴⁶ there is no place in his works where he fleshes out in any detail the specific form of the analytical process within his materialist 'systematic-dialectical' approach. Moreover, despite all the light that the recent works on Marx's method have cast on the form of his systematic argument, they have been mainly focused on the *synthetic* aspects of Marx's dialectical presentation (that is, on the exposition of the dialectical movement 'from the abstract to the concrete'), at the expense of an insufficient thematisation of the peculiar rôle of the phase of analysis in his dialectical investigation generally, and in his presentation in *Capital* in particular.⁴⁷ And yet, we would like to argue that it is of utmost importance to grasp the difference between materialist analysis and Hegel's idealist abstraction. True, many authors have highlighted the distinction between the abstractions of Marx's critique of political economy and those of conventional social science.⁴⁸ However, not so many have critically engaged with Hegel's abstracting procedure. More importantly, as Iñigo Carrera points out, most authors have overlooked that the difference in the respective kinds of abstraction emerges as a result of the very *form* of the process of cognition on the basis of which those abstractions are identified.⁴⁹ This difference in form not only applies to the synthetic or genetic phase as is usually assumed, but crucially pertains to the process of analysis as well.

Although Marx did not leave us any written formalisation of the specificity of materialist analysis, it is possible to grasp its concrete workings from the 'analysis of the commodity' contained in the opening pages of *Capital*.⁵⁰ As he explicitly states in the 'Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner's *Lehrbuch der politischen Oekonomie*', this analysis takes as a point of departure neither the con-

46 Marx 1973 [1857–8], p. 100, and 1989, p. 500.

47 An outstanding exception can be found in the work of Iñigo Carrera (1992, 2007, 2013, and in this volume), on whose contribution we fundamentally draw.

48 See Gunn 1992, p. 17, Clarke 1991, p. 81ff, and Murray 1988, p. 121ff.

49 Iñigo Carrera 2013, p. 50ff.

50 Since it is in the synthetic phase only that the unfolding of the real movement or life of the subject-matter and hence the explanation actually takes place, the presentation of the findings of the dialectical inquiry could take, in principle, a fully synthetic form (Iñigo Carrera 1992, p. 41). However, this is not the way Marx structured his dialectical exposition in Volume I of *Capital* in general and in Chapter I in particular; this exposition tends to include, in a 'stylised' form, brief presentations of the analytic process (Iñigo Carrera 1992, p. 46). In a context where Marx was presenting his materialist-dialectical method for the first time, his decision to include the analytical phase in the exposition might have played the rôle of bringing out its specificity *vis-à-vis* Hegel's idealist procedure.

cepts of political economy nor any concept whatsoever.⁵¹ Instead, he starts with the immediate observation of 'the simplest social form in which the labour-product is presented in contemporary society':⁵² the *commodity in the form in which it appears*. From this starting point, Marx proceeds by taking the individual commodity 'in his own hand' and analysing 'the formal determinants that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity'.⁵³

These 'formal determinants' Marx initially discovers by looking at the use-value of the individual commodity, which in capitalist societies acts as bearer of a second, *historically specific* attribute of the products of labour. As happens with every real form, the first thing he encounters when facing the exchangeability of the commodity is its *immediate manifestation* – the quantitative relation 'in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another'.⁵⁴ The next step in the analysis of exchangeability is the uncovering of the *more abstract form* (hence the *content*) behind that specific formal attribute of the commodity, this being the only way in which we can penetrate through the concrete form in which an immanent determination presents itself. Thus, the further analysis of the commodity reveals that exchange-value is actually the 'mode of expression' or 'form of manifestation' of a content distinguishable from it – value – the substance of which resides in the abstract labour congealed or materialised in it.

As is now widely acknowledged in the literature, the sequence at that particular stage of Marx's argument consists in going from *form* to *content*. However, the crux of the matter does not simply reside in realising this (which, at any rate, is explicitly announced by Marx himself in those pages), but in grasping the precise way in which properly dialectical analysis discovers the content behind the form and, therefore, their inner connection.

As Iñigo Carrera points out, conventional scientific method analyses a concrete form by separating what repeats itself from what does not in order to arrive at a certain characteristic. In turn, this common attribute makes possible the mental construction of a definition of that concrete form as that which has this or that attribute.⁵⁵ On his part, Hegel's pure abstraction in the *Logic* proceeds by casting aside all particular features of objects (that is, all determinacy) in order to find through that one step the 'abstract universal' that constitutes its simplest element. Regardless of their differences, these two procedures have in common that they result in strictly mental abstractions or categories

51 Marx 2002 [1879/1881], p. 241.

52 Ibid.

53 Marx 1976c [1867], p. 1059.

54 Marx 1976c [1867], p. 126.

55 Iñigo Carrera 2013, pp. 50–1.

which, by their own nature as 'pure thoughts', cannot but remain external and alien to the forms of material reality. Conversely, dialectical thought analyses a concrete form by, first of all, facing it as embodying a qualitative potentiality for transformation, and second, by grasping that qualitative potentiality as the concrete form in which a more abstract form realises its own qualitative potentiality, that is, its real necessity. Thus the dialectical ideal appropriation of the universe of different real forms does not proceed through an identification of the distinctiveness of forms on the basis of the degree of repetition of certain attributes. But neither does it operate by *abstracting from* every particular determination. Rather, it analytically separates the different forms by discovering as *immanent* in a particular concrete form the realised potentiality of another real form, which is abstract with respect to the first one, but concrete with respect to another form of which it is the realised potentiality.

While conventional scientific method grasps the general determination of real forms as immediate affirmations and hence self-subsistent entities, the distinctive mark of the process of analysis in dialectical research is to grasp, *in the same analytic movement*, both the concrete form under scrutiny and the more abstract one of which the former is the developed mode of existence. In other words, dialectical thought grasps each form as the affirmation through self-negation of another, more abstract one (hence, as subjects of their own movement). Moreover, in contradistinction to Hegelian abstraction or conventional scientific analysis, Marx's dialectical analysis at no point leaves the terrain of the real. Both the immediate concrete form that he encounters and the relatively more abstract one discovered through analysis (the content) are wholly objective and real determinations of the object under scrutiny. This analytical procedure must be then renewed for those other more abstract forms, but now treated as the real concrete whose inner content the research is trying to uncover. Only once all those inner form-determinations have been discovered through analysis should the investigation undertake the 'return-journey' through which those abstract determinations, now in their self-movement, lead to 'the reproduction of the concrete by means of thought'.⁵⁶

Ideal Reproduction of the Ideal versus Ideal Reproduction of the Concrete

Let us now return to the *thought of being* with which the *Logic* begins. As we have seen, this pure being is the product of total abstraction and, from a materialist standpoint, cannot be a real being; it can only exist as a *thought-form*. However, it could still be argued, as Smith does, that such thought of being is

⁵⁶ Marx 1973 [1857–8], p. 100.

'isomorphic' with (hence reflects) real material being, so that there would be nothing problematic in unfolding the immanent life of the former as a substitute for the latter. If we took on board Hegel's characterisation of pure being as being that simply is, one could argue that the least that can be thought about any real object is that it is. Thus, according to this view the structure of ideal being would fully coincide with that of real being on this point.⁵⁷ However, nothing guarantees that the simplest (or rather poorest or emptiest) statement that we could utter 'to make an object intelligible' actually coincides with the simplest form in which a real concrete exists. In fact, as we suggest later on, the simplest form of existence of 'real material being' is not 'pure being'. In light of the previous section, we would be entitled to claim that the former and the latter coincide only *after* submitting an existing object to materialist analysis in the sense discussed above. In other words, only if after uncovering the respective content of each form-determination that we find *within* the real concrete under scrutiny, we encountered pure being as the simplest of them all, would it be scientifically correct to undertake the synthetic phase of reproduction with that 'category' as starting point. However, we have shown that this is not what Hegel actually did. And neither is it what those materialist readings of Hegel do.⁵⁸

Still, if we further insisted on the isomorphic structure between the respective simplest forms of ideal and material being, the divergence between Hegel's idealist construction and material reality would re-emerge in the second step of the systematic unfolding of categories, namely, the passing over of pure being into pure nothing. If in the case of pure being there is at least the formal possibility that it ideally reflects the simplest determination of material being, in the case of pure nothing even that formal possibility should be ruled out from the outset. Indeed, from a materialist standpoint, the reality of pure nothing is simply meaningless. Thus, as Feuerbach's early critique sharply puts it, 'the opposition itself between being and nothingness exists only in the imagination, for being, of course, exists in reality – or rather it is the real itself – but nothingness, not-being, exists only in imagination and reflection'.⁵⁹

57 Houlgate 2005, pp. 140–2.

58 Smith's interpretation is a case in point. Despite correctly distinguishing between formal and real abstractions (Smith 1990, p. 60), he approvingly presents Hegel's 'analysis' as involving the 'appropriation of the results of empirical studies' undertaken by 'empirical sciences' (Smith 1990, p. 4); which is certainly different from the ideal appropriation of the real abstract forms of a given concrete object. As a matter of fact, those abstractions borrowed from empirical sciences have been constructed on the basis of the conventional scientific method. As argued above, they cannot but be purely formal or ideal.

59 Feuerbach 1983 [1839], p. 126.

Having ruled out the material existence of pure being and nothing, one could still search for the alleged correspondence between Hegel's *Logic* and material reality in the third moment of their dialectic, that is, in 'becoming'.⁶⁰ Thus considered, being and nothing could be said to be just analytical moments which are necessary to grasp the truly simplest logical category – becoming – which would at last reflect the simplest form of real material objects, being a subject that posits its own movement. If this were the case, one could conclude that, despite conceiving it as a movement of pure thought, Hegel would have managed to grasp the simplest content of real being. However, 'becoming' is for Hegel a category that is still quite far from fully expressing the constitutive contradiction of a self-determining or self-moving subject. In so far as Hegel's *Logic* unfolds the immanent necessity of thought as such, starting from its simplest (or rather emptiest) form, his categorial development needs to go through a long series of still more complex thought-forms before being able to express fully the said movement of contradiction that constitutes the simplest determination of real materiality.

In fact, the actual point at which Hegel's exposition eventually reaches a category that fully expresses the simple movement of a self-determining subject, comes quite a few pages and categories later. Specifically, this point is only reached with the category of 'being-for-self', where Hegel finally states that 'qualitative being finds its consummation' so that, therefore, we have at last arrived at 'absolutely determined being'.⁶¹ However, from a materialist standpoint, this begs the question as to why cognition of the real concrete needs to go over those other imperfect forms of ideally expressing the simplest movement of material qualitative determination, which only grasp the latter in its outward or external manifestations: whether as an immediate affirmation (being) or as the extrinsic unity of two opposed immediate affirmations (determinate being). Indeed, one would be led to conclude that the unfolding of those categories is quite simply superfluous. In effect, from this perspective, the imperfect forms of ideally expressing the 'affirming through self-negation' are not *materially constitutive* of what this movement actually is.

Still, a final argument for a materialist reading of the categories preceding 'being-for-self' could state that their exposition corresponds to the *analytical process* of discovery of the category that is able fully to express the real movement of affirmation through self-negation. The problem with this line of reasoning is that according to Hegel's perspective, those poorer ways of conceiving qualitative being have the same status of objectivity as its fully-developed

60 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 82.

61 Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 156.

shape. In this sense, the movement from these poorer forms of expressing qualitative being to its consummation in being-for-self is not seen by Hegel as essentially analytic but *synthetic*. In so far as the *Logic* unfolds the immanent necessity of 'pure thought' as such, the imperfect forms of thinking about this peculiar 'being' are as constitutive of this 'object-realm' as their perfectly developed modes of existence. Thus, it is entirely coherent for Hegel to include those categories in his systematic dialectic of thought-forms. However, the consequence of this is that any attempt to take over Hegel's *Logic* as a whole will take the mystical shell (that is, the whole series of superfluous imperfect categories that pure thought needs to posit before reaching the plenitude of its content) alongside the rational kernel (the category that eventually expresses the determination at stake in an adequate form).

It follows from this that a reading of the *Logic* from a materialist perspective cannot consist in just 'casting aside God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea, etc.' or in uncovering the logical structure articulating the systematic ordering of categories. For both the categories and the form of their unfolding are, from the very beginning, of an inherently idealist character. Instead, a materialist reading must consist in carefully recognising which real determinations could be reflected by Hegel at certain stages of his idealist systematic dialectic. Evidently, the recognition of those determinations can only take place *vis-à-vis* the actual knowledge of those simpler forms of material reality. Thus, strictly speaking, the issue at stake is not simply to read the *Logic* from a materialist perspective. The question is rather to appropriate its 'use-value' to *rewrite it materialistically*, that is, to unfold the simpler determinations of material reality in their inner connection. Needless to say, this obviously exceeds the scope of this chapter. Here we just offered a discussion of the point of departure of such a materialist appropriation of the rational kernel of Hegel's *Logic*, which we have identified with his category of 'being-for-self'.⁶² Our aim in this section was thus much more modest; the point was simply to show the intrinsically idealist nature of Hegel's systematic development in order to shed light on its difference from Marx's materialist approach. Let us therefore elaborate further on this point, through an examination of the general form taken by Hegel's systematic unfolding of categories.

Towards the end of the *Logic* Hegel discusses this question explicitly. 'What is to be considered here as method', he states, 'is only the movement of the

62 On this we simply drew on the work of Iñigo Carrera, who fleshes out the discovery of the said point of departure – that is, affirming through self-negation of real material being – as strictly emerging as a result of materialist analysis in the sense discussed above (Iñigo Carrera 1992, pp. 3–5).

Notion itself . . . the *universal absolute activity*.⁶³ However, this movement is not presented by Hegel as simply taking the generic form of affirmation through self-negation through which a self-determining subject realises its own immanent necessity. Instead, in so far as he conceives of it as a pure movement of thought striving for a fully developed mode of expressing its truth-content, he presents it as the unity of the *three moments* through which thought needs to pass in order to self-posit in such an adequate shape. Thus, he concludes, 'the whole form of the method is a triplicity'.⁶⁴ The movement of affirmation through self-negation, which as the simplest content of the 'immanent life' of any material object, constitutes the generic form taken by a materialist-dialectical unfolding, is represented by Hegel as the abstract sequence of an affirmation, a negation and, lastly, the negation of the negation. In other words, Hegel does not directly present the third moment, which is the only one that constitutes the effective material reality of the object. Instead, he firstly needs to posit the prior two 'imperfect' moments, which are just formal stages through which thought needs to go to grasp the 'truth' of the object, as if they were constitutive of the effective objective reality of the object itself. This 'triadic structure' of the absolute method, which derives from the idealist character of the Hegelian dialectic, is also eloquently criticised by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

So what is this absolute method? The abstraction of movement. What is the abstraction of movement? Movement in abstract condition. What is movement in abstract condition? The purely logical formula of movement or the movement of pure reason. Wherein does the movement of pure reason consist? In posing itself, opposing itself, composing itself; in formulating itself as thesis, antithesis, synthesis; or, yet, in affirming itself, negating itself, and negating its negation.⁶⁵

In brief, what is rational in Hegel's dialectic, that is, its method of immanent development of the life of the subject-matter, appears inverted under the mystical form of the three moments of self-developing pure thought. Again, this mystical shell directly stems from the fact that Hegel's systematic dialectic does not ideally follow the immanent life of a concrete material object but an ideal one, namely pure thought. Hegel's 'mysticism' in the *Logic* therefore derives from being the *ideal reproduction of the ideal*. By contrast, in making

⁶³ Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 826.

⁶⁴ Hegel 1999 [1812–16], p. 836.

⁶⁵ Marx 1976b [1847], p. 164.

analysis instead of abstraction, Marx's scientific method at no point leaves the concrete material object of investigation behind. No matter how abstract and far from its immediate sensuous existence the analytical process eventually takes him, *he remains firmly within the materiality of the object*. As a consequence, the moment of systematic synthetic unfolding cannot but be the 'reproduction of the concrete by means of thought'.

Among all the places where Marx expounds this kind of materialist ideal reproduction, it is also probably in the first chapter of *Capital* where it can be found with utmost clarity and in a more 'stylised' form. Specifically, this reproduction only starts in section III of Chapter I, entitled 'The value-form, or exchange-value'.⁶⁶ As argued elsewhere, strictly speaking the first two sections of that chapter are not part of the *synthetic* movement of the dialectical exposition but constitute its *analytical* prelude.⁶⁷ As we have seen, the analytic stage only separates a concrete form from a more abstract one, whose realised potentiality it carries within itself in the form of its own immanent potentiality. In this sense, the analytic stage does not ideally reflect the immanent self-movement of the object under consideration. It is therefore not about the *why* but about the *what*. Evidently, since the apprehension of real forms according to their relative degree of abstractness or concreteness ideally expresses the objective necessity (the real relations) residing in the object and are not the product of the subjective caprice or imagination of the scientist, the mere reference to the 'what' carries implicitly some hint of the 'why'. Thus, if the dialectical analysis reveals that the value-form is the concrete form in which the objectification of the abstract character of private and independent labour affirms itself as an abstract form, the separation between the two already says something about the real relation involved. But this something is no more than, as it were, a 'pointing out', an external observation. The actual exposition of that inner connection between content and form – hence its explanation – takes place in the *synthetic* phase of *reproduction*, which faces the challenge of precisely showing that movement which the analysis was incapable of unfolding. This consists in ideally following the realisation of the discovered potentiality immanent in the commodity, namely value. From then on, the commodity ceases to be grasped in its exteriority as an 'inert' external object and the exposition starts to follow its self-movement as the subject of the development of

66 Marx 1976c [1867], p. 138.

67 See Starosta 2008 for a close examination of the structure of Marx's exposition in Chapter I of *Capital*. For a more detailed discussion of the methodological implications of Marx's ideal reproduction in general, see Iñigo Carrera 2007, 2013, and in this volume.

those determinations previously discovered through analysis into ever more concrete forms.⁶⁸

The unfolding of this movement spoken in 'the language of commodities'⁶⁹ is precisely what the ideal reproduction consists of. Value being the purely social power of the commodity, it cannot be immediately expressed in its sensuous corporeal materiality. As the capacity of the commodity to be exchanged for other different commodities, value can only be manifested in the social relation of exchange between commodities. Therefore, the value of a commodity necessarily expresses itself only in the use-value of the commodity that is exchanged for the commodity in question as its equivalent. In this way, value takes the concrete shape of exchange-value as its necessary form of manifestation. In its most developed form, value acquires independent existence as money and the expression of value in the particular commodity acting as money becomes determined as price. The opposition inherent in the commodity is thus externalised through the doubling of the commodity-form into ordinary commodities and money. The power of direct exchangeability of commodities negates itself as such to become affirmed as a social power monopolised by the money-form.

It is in the course of the movement of this reproduction, when seen from the point of view of its *qualitative content*, that the answer to the questions which the analytic stage was impotent fully to provide is given. In other words, it is the development of the expression of value that unfolds the explanation as to why the objectification of the abstract character of privately performed labour takes the social form of value or, to put it differently, why private labour is value-producing. In a nutshell, the issue comes down to the fact that it is only the expression of value that progressively reveals to us the problem that the commodity-form of the product of labour is meant to solve. We are referring to the mediation in the establishment of the unity of social labour when performed in a private and independent manner. And since this unity becomes condensed in the money-form, it is the unfolding of its determinations, synthesised in the peculiarities of the equivalent-form and derived from its general determination as the form of immediate exchangeability, that provides the answer to the question as to why privately performed socially necessary labour must produce value.

Note, however, that the properly *dialectical* unfolding of the movement of this qualitative determination is, in essence, already achieved with the simple form of value. The subsequent passage to the other, more developed forms of

68 Iñigo Carrera, in this volume, p. 74ff.

69 Marx 1976c [1867], p. 143.

value is simply a formal movement that merely generalises and makes explicit the qualitative content already expressed in the simple form (namely, the immanent necessity for value to acquire an outward, differentiated mode of existence). In other, more polemic terms, the sequence of the more developed forms of value as such is not structured according to an immanent necessity of those forms. As Iñigo Carrera puts it, the sequence of forms of value 'does not imply a simpler form [of the exchange-relation] engendering a more concrete one. Instead, the unfolding of the former's necessity evidences the necessity of the existence of the latter.'⁷⁰ This is, we think, the actual meaning behind Marx's remark that 'the whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form.'⁷¹

In light of this, we can now bring out a crucial difference between Marx's and Hegel's respective ideal reproductions. Specifically, Marx's ideal reproduction of the commodity-form simply follows the realisation of its immanent necessity to 'affirm' by developing a more concrete mode of existence as money (that is, through self-negation). However, unlike Hegel's idealist method of reproduction in the *Logic*, in order to do this Marx does not need to mediate this exposition with a prior positing of the inadequate forms in which *thought conceives of* those immanent determinations of the commodity which drive them to self-movement. For Marx, those inadequate conceptualisations of the inner determinations of the commodity are not *constitutive* of the objective reality of the commodity itself, and have therefore no place in the *systematic unfolding of its immanent life*. Instead, they are seen by Marx as (*fetishised*) *appearances* through which non-dialectical thought grasps those determinations in their sheer exteriority. In any case, those apparent relationships between real forms should have been already examined and *ruled out* by the investigation in the previous methodological phase of *analysis*. In Marx's presentation, when discussions of those essentially *ideological* scientific representations of real relations do occur, they tend to have status of an *external remark*, and are deliberately located *after* the immanent determination has been unfolded.

4 Conclusion

This chapter offered a contribution to the debate on the methodological connection between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital* through a discussion of the

⁷⁰ Iñigo Carrera, 2013, pp. 58–9.

⁷¹ Marx 1976c [1867], p. 139.

rational kernel and mystical shell found in the former. Very briefly put, our argument was that in that work Hegel managed to discover the simplest form of the real, namely, the movement of self-determination of the subject. As a consequence, he correctly presents the method of science as the systematic unfolding of the immanent life of the subject-matter. Against Colletti, we have argued that this is the rational kernel to be found in his work and it is not inherently tied to absolute idealism. However, instead of taking the simplest form of real material being as point of departure, his exposition begins with the simplest thought-form ('pure being'). The systematic dialectic that follows therefore inevitably unfolds a whole series of redundant categories which, from a materialist standpoint, correspond to the immanent necessity of pure thought only. In other words, they do not express any objective determination of real material being. This is the *Logic's* mystical shell.

We have also argued that an immediate reason behind that spurious starting point resides in his methodological procedure of 'extreme' formal abstraction, which arbitrarily casts aside all particular determination until reaching a wholly empty universal, namely, the *thought* of being. By contrast we have seen that Marx finds a materialist alternative to formal abstraction in dialectical *analysis*. Instead of the sheer abstraction from apparently contingent features of objects, Marx's analysis moves by searching for the real more abstract or simple content of the concrete form he is immediately facing. The procedure is then repeated by further analysing each of the relatively more abstract determinations discovered, until reaching the simplest immanent content of the initial concrete. Materialist analysis therefore remains firmly within the real object through and through.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this with regard to the current debate on Marx's dialectical method in *Capital*. Firstly, in so far as the ideal reproduction of the concrete by means of thought needs to reflect ideally the *specific* immanent determinations of the subject-matter, this method does not proceed, as Diamat would have it, by *applying* the 'general laws of dialectics' or 'abstract logical structures' onto more concrete domains of knowledge. In this sense, the movement of affirmation through self-negation must not be turned into an absolute *general principle* that needs to be *applied* to *economic categories*. As the form of movement, the 'inner life', of the concrete object that we want to appropriate by means of thought, it has to be followed in its specific modes of existence and development. This is why, for instance, Marx's *Capital*, as a critique of political economy, is not (*pace* Engels) an application of dialectical logic to political economy, but the ideal reproduction of the real determinations of capital as the alienated social subject of bourgeois society, starting with its simplest mode of existence, namely, the commodity.

Secondly, the problem with Hegel's unfolding of categories in the *Logic* does not simply reside in his absolute idealism, but fundamentally in the methodological procedure by which he arrives at its point of departure and the form taken by the subsequent synthetic reconstitution of the unity of the immanent determinations of his object. In other words, even if we took on board Smith's point that Hegel considered the independent existence of an objective reality outside thought, his systematic dialectic would be still defective from a materialist standpoint. As a consequence, it should not be simply taken over but first needs to be thoroughly 'rewritten' materialistically.

Finally, although not explicitly addressed in this chapter, it does follow from our discussion that the structures of the *Logic* and *Capital* cannot be treated as homologous as in Arthur's view. As the previous section has shown, the general form of motion of the synthetic stage of reproduction differs between the two works, with Hegel's idealist dialectic ridden with superfluous formal steps in the argument which have no place in Marx's materialist approach.

In sum, a materialist appropriation of the methodological insights found in the *Logic* for the critique of political economy must carefully cast aside its mystical shell.